**My critical essay of Rossetti’s “*The sonnet*”**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was Italian by birth and English by citizenship. He lived throughout the mid-late 1800’s during the time of Aesthetic decadence. As an advocate of Aestheticism, Rossetti believed in the sole beauty of art over art imitating life. Rossetti’s poem, “*The Sonnet”,* was written to Rossetti’s mother for her 80th birthday. The poem is a great representation of Victorian Aestheticism because throughout the poem, Rossetti shows his anxiety for Victorian materialism and social confusion. To Rossetti, art (the sonnet) transcends time and carries on the legacy of the artist. Although the tone becomes less contemplative and more melancholy as the poem progresses, the poem still asserts that art (the sonnet) is a monument of life.

The Victorian era was relatively peaceful, but there was a prevalent loss of faith among the members of the English artistic community. The popular prudery of the era left many writers and artists questioning the value of their works. Poets similar to Rossetti began the Aesthetic movement in response to the social transformations of the era. Rossetti compares the sonnet to a coin (Stanza 2, Line 1). The coin is a metonymy for money or riches. When Rossetti compares the sides of the coins, he actually emphasizes the struggle between power or riches versus the soul. The author’s tone about the “Power” (Stanza 2, line 2) side of the coin is very bleak compared to the previous stanza. Not only is there a shift in tone when the subject of power is brought up, but the form of the poem changes altogether. The meter of the poem is predominantly iambic pentameter, but the first octave of the poem follows the Italian sonnet

form and the second stanza follows the English sonnet form. The combination of the sonnet origins reflects the background Rossetti grew up in (Italian/English). Rossetti’s father was exiled from his home country for writing about the greed of the government. Rossetti’s father instilled ant materialist values into his mind, and the framework of his values was displayed in Rossetti’s poems. The beginning line of the sonnet conveys that the Sonnet is meant for personal moments and the life of the sonnet is lost when mass produced for money (the other side of the coin). The word “look” in the poem demonstrates how Rossetti is calling on other poets, artists, and his mother about the need for social change. Rossetti’s allusions to the anxiety of death were not for his own life, but for the death of poetry due to contemporary marginalization.

Like many Aesthetic idealists, Rossetti felt that the Sonnet was tantamount to the soul. The Sonnet and the soul are personified in the poem, and therefore elevated in importance to the reader. “Its own intricate fullness…” (Stanza 1, line 3) means that the sonnet will live on as a legacy of the writer. The sonnet takes on its own life. When the tone shifts in the second stanza, the reader sees that Rossetti is anxious about his legacy in a world that does not value the beauty of poetry and art. This point is made clear through the emotionally charged ending line “Pay the toll to death...” (Stanza 2, Line 6). The profound image of the “cavernous breath” allows Rossetti to transfer his concern to the reader. The reader then notices that without the appreciation and personal reverence to art, artistic for and legacy dies with the artist. Rossetti wants the sonnet to live on through the bad and good times. The image of “day and night” (Stanza 1, line 5) and

“ebony and ivory” (Stanza 2, line 4) helps the reader visualize what art can withstand if people continue to care about art through the ages.

When the reader starts to speak the words of the first line, they have to pause and reflect on the alliteration, sound, and overall meaning of “The moment’s monument”. The reader must remember that Rossetti intended this poem as a gift for his mother. Ironically, the somber poem celebrates life. The “August appeals” applies to Rossetti’s mother in her peak of life. Rossetti alluded that one’s peak of life is bound to wane. The oxymoron “dead deathless” (Stanza 1, Line 4) is relatively optimistic. Rossetti knew that through the money, the very concept he loathed, his name would live on if his work was valued.

The in depth poem by Rossetti has a religious feel of time, or timelessness. With the combination of stressed content and form, Rossetti showed his anxiety of Victorian material value, he emphasized the sonnet as similar to the soul, and he shared his thoughts about personal monuments in art that are kept personal.

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**THE SONNET**  
D. G. Rossetti

A Sonnet is a moment's monument,--  
Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,  
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,  
Of its own intricate fulness reverent:  
Carve it in ivory or in ebony,  
As Day or Night prevail; and let Time see  
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.  
  
A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,--its converse, to what Power 'tis due:--  
Whether for tribute to the august appeals  
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue  
It serve; or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,  
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.